

Agricultural Environmental Enhancement Program: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

General Questions:

1. What is "equipment"?

"Equipment" means instruments or tools or machinery which is used to implement a project but which by itself has no environmental benefits. Examples include an excavator, a tractor, or tools. Materials are the component parts of a project which directly mitigate impacts on the environment - fence posts and high tensile fence strands for a fencing project; concrete and gravel for a manure storage structure; irrigation tape for a trickle irrigation project. Some equipment purchases may be eligible if the use of the equipment can be shown to have a direct environmental benefit.

2. Can I apply if my farm has less than 5 acres?

For FY2012 we have removed the size requirements traditionally held for AEEP. However, projects that address significant resource concerns are more likely to receive funding.

3. Is a non-profit group eligible to apply?

Non-profit groups are eligible to apply for funding.

4. Are photovoltaic systems eligible?

Energy related projects such as solar power are now part of MDAR's AG-Energy Grant Program. Applicants are encouraged to speak to the Department's Energy Coordinator, Gerry Palano, at 617-626-1706.

5. Can I use funding for repairs or maintenance to a completed project or repairing a hole in the roof over a barn?

No, funding for repairs or for maintenance to an already completed project, even if the project originally reduced impacts on a resource, is not allowed as the program is intended to fund the purchase of materials to implement conservation practices, not repairs of existing structures. The program funds the purchase of materials which are intended to mitigate impacts on a resource only.

6. Are trickle irrigation systems eligible for funding?

Yes. Trickle irrigation systems have been funded in the past. Clearly showing how a trickle irrigation system improves both water use and improves water quality is an important part of an application.

7. Can I use the funding to make up the match for an NRCS EQIP funded project?

Yes. AEEP frequently partners with EQIP to make up a portion of the difference between EQIP funds and the overall cost of a project. However, AEEP will only contribute funds sufficient to make up to 95% of the cost of the project. The farmer is expected to contribute at least 5% to the cost of the materials for the project.

Conservation Plans:

1. Why do shellfish growers not need a Conservation Plan from NRCS?

Because NRCS does not generate conservation plans for shellfish operations, the Department relies on the shellfish best management practice guide for the shellfish aquaculture operations (see the RFR for more details). Where there are no NRCS standards or BMPs, the Department relies on manufacturer standards.

2. What if NRCS does not generate a Conservation Plan for my type of operation?

If NRCS does not generate conservation plans for your type of operation, a farmer must provide a standard or data which can assure the review team that a proposed approach is viable and will actually achieve the stated goals of the AEEP program. Ideally, the proposed approach is documented in a published technical document as a viable best management practice. If that is not the case, the review team for AEEP would look for an independent technical assessment to show that a proposed approach is valid, that it is environmentally beneficial and will not impact on production.

3. Can I apply if I do not currently have a conservation plan but am working with NRCS to develop a plan?

Yes. A farmer may apply but must have the conservation plan developed before any contract can be signed. The Accelerated Conservation Planning Program of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts, the Department and NRCS coordinate resources to accelerate the development of conservation plans to meet the need for farmers to have conservation plans in place for various programs.

Procedures:

1. Can I apply on behalf of myself and a dozen or so other farmers for emissions devices which will allow me to secure a bulk discount with the retailer, and then distribute the devices to the other farmers?

No. AEEP is a competitive grants program where contracts are developed between the state and individual farm operations. All farms have to be evaluated on an individual basis to ensure that they are economically and environmentally viable operations that are in compliance with existing state, federal and local laws. Also, the logistics of ensuring that the devices would be fairly distributed are beyond the scope and resources of the program.

2. Can I submit a draft of my application for you to review for completeness prior to the final submission?

No. Procurement procedures require that the Department wait until after the deadline to open applications. So to be fair to other applicants, the Department can accept applications but cannot review them to ensure completeness until after the deadline.

3. If I already started my project before applying for the funds can I still be reimbursed?

No. A farmer must have a signed contract with the state before starting a project. Once the Department signs the contract, the farmer can begin the project.

4. What are the purpose of site visits and how many will occur?

An initial site visit will occur if your project is being considered for funding. The purpose of this visit is to:

- Verify the information that is presented in the proposal
- View the agricultural operation and assess the resource to be addressed
- Determine the appropriateness of the practice proposed for the farm
- Confirm the ability to implement and maintain the practice; and
- Develop a basis for future “before and after” comparisons.

After the project is completed and receipts have been submitted to MDAR for re-imbursement a second site visit will occur to verify the project has been completed in accordance with the contract.

5. After the project is completed what involvement will the Department have with my farm?

According to the Scope of Services included with the contract the farmer is obligated to maintain the Practice for at least five years. In addition, the farmer is to allow a representative of MDAR to enter upon the property to conduct periodic surveys of the Practice for the life of the Practice.

6. What is the re-imbursement process once a project is completed?

All projects must be completed by the date specified within the contract. Once the project is completed receipts are submitted to MDAR. Once they are submitted a site visit will be scheduled to verify the project is completed in accordance with the contract. Once the site visit is completed the invoices will be submitted for re-imbursement. If a direct deposit form is included with the completed contract, the funds will be directed to the account specified; otherwise a check will be issued.

7. The application states that a map must be included for consideration, are maps that are not generated by NRCS accepted (i.e. Google maps, or MapQuest maps)?

Although NRCS has software that can accurately generate a farms boundaries and the exact location for the project, MDAR does not specify that the maps must be generated by NRCS.